



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE JEWISH LITERATURE OF NEW TESTAMENT
TIMES: WHY SHOULD IT BE STUDIED?

By F. C. PORTER, PH.D.

Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.

The Old Testament is not the only record of the historical antecedents of Christianity. The period between the Old and New Testaments was not barren and lifeless; it was full of incident and change. The outer events and the inner movements of this age found record in a various and extensive literature, which followed in general the old lines of law, prophecy, history, wisdom and poetry. There were the books of the Apocrypha; apocalypses, such as the Book of Enoch, the Assumption of Moses, IV Ezra and Baruch, and other pseudepigraphic writings; the histories of Josephus; the philosophical works of Philo, and other products of Alexandrian Judaism; and finally the rabbinical writings, Talmuds and Midrashim, which, though coming to writing at a later time, contain traditional material belonging to the earlier period. It is not my purpose to enumerate in detail or to describe these writings,* but to consider the general question whether it is worth while to study them, and especially to ask of what use, if any, they may be to the student of the New Testament.

The study of this literature has been undertaken, as a matter of fact, more often in the interests of dogma than of history; and particularly with the aim of disproving, or else of vindicating, the supernatural origin of Christianity. The attempt to prove, on the one side, that Christianity was the natural product of historical conditions, and, on the other, that it was entirely independent of them, has led to a diligent though prejudiced study of the writings in which those conditions come to light.

According to one view, the Messianic character taken by

* For information regarding them see Schürer's *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ* (T. and T. Clark), or encyclopedias at the proper headings (e. g. Herzog, Schaff-Herzog, Britannica).

Jesus and the hopes that he inspired, are explained as the result of popular beliefs and expectations which the apocalyptic writings of the age reveal and prove to have been prevalent. The moral precepts which he put forth, and in general the method and matter of his teaching, are accounted for by the Talmud and the work of the scribes. This is naturally the opinion of Jewish scholars, and is concisely stated by one of them (Geiger) as follows: "Jesus was a Pharisee who walked in the paths of Hillel; he never gave utterance to a new idea,"—a sentence which Delitzsch's "Jesus and Hillel" was written to refute. This position, taken by Jews for religious reasons, is adopted by rationalism on philosophical grounds, and is maintained in some form by all who in our own day hold to evolution in the naturalistic sense. All who from their dogmatic position cannot ascribe to Jesus more than a man's part in the origination of Christianity, are obliged to assign a proportionally larger part to the ideas and conditions of the age.

We have to thank these opponents of supernaturalism for the stimulus they have given to historical study, and for bringing to recognition the fact of a living continuity and movement in history which had been overlooked. It is unfortunate, however, that the conflict they awakened has given to the answering work of conservative scholars the tone of self-defense. The polemical use of the writings before us has been met by their apologetical use. They have been studied with the aim of proving that Christianity was not the natural outcome of Judaism, but was wholly independent of it; that the only relation was one of antagonism. If the former use led to an over-estimation of these books, the latter led as naturally to an excessive disparagement of them. They were studied diligently for the purpose of discovering whatever in them is trivial or untrue, in order to set off by contrast the superiority of the new system and its books. This is a task not hard to perform, and not without its uses; but it is evidently prejudicial to fairness and unlikely to yield results of positive historical value, unlikely moreover to do justice to the real preëminence of Christianity.

As early as the thirteenth century the Talmud and other rabbinical writings were searched with laborious thorough-

ness by Christian scholars in controversy with the Jews. The diligence of their work is admirable; but it was not truth that they looked for, and truth was not what they found. It was not even a mistaken zeal for Christianity so much as an unchristian hatred of the Jews that proved so effective an incentive to scholarship. One of the most famous monuments of this use of the Jewish writings is Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judenthum* (Judaism Disclosed), first printed in 1700, the learned source of numberless ignorant attacks upon the Jews, and of many misconceptions as to their books. One need not go beyond the title-page to learn the character and animus of the book. It professes to be "a thorough and truthful account of the way in which the obdurate Jews do frightfully blaspheme and dishonor the most holy trinity derisively traduce the New Testament and exceedingly despise and curse all Christendom." It promises to bring to light "gross errors of the Jewish religion and theology, together with many ridiculous and amusing fables and other absurd matters." Its historical value is vitiated not only by its temper and aim, but by its use of late and unrepresentative writings, whose sole claim for consideration is that they were written in Hebrew.

Happily, in our day, the old bitterness and narrowness are gone; but there is still no little searching of the Talmud for the purpose of proving that it is not equal to the Gospel and was not its source, that Jesus was not a pupil of the scribes, and that they borrowed from him, not he from them. There is much study that sets out too anxiously to find contrasts and antitheses between the old faith and the new, assuming that the one can get dignity and worth only by the disparagement of the other. All of which seems to argue a feeble grasp of the certainties of faith no less than an inadequate conception of the rights and spirit of science.

The proper task of historical science is not to vindicate the Gospel, for it waits for no such vindication, but to *understand* it. If we leave, then, both polemic and apology, and approach the study of these Jewish writings, as far as may be, in a disinterested and open-minded way, we shall find in them useful aid to the understanding of the historical beginnings of Christianity, and of the record of those beginnings in the New Testament.

In four ways, at least, they offer such service ; in language, in history, in archæology, in thought.

1. As to the help these writings give in the interpretation of New Testament language, there can be no better statement and justification than that of Dr. John Lightfoot in the dedicatory preface to his "*Hebrew and Talmudical Exercitations*," published between 1644 and 1664, the first serious attempt to put the Jewish writings to this use, and a book which is not even yet antiquated. He says :

"First, when all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews, and among Jews, and unto them ; and when all the discourses made there, were made in like manner by Jews, and to Jews, and among them, I was always fully persuaded, as of a thing past all doubting, that that Testament could not but everywhere taste of, and retain the Jews' style, idiom, form and rule of speaking. And hence in the second place, I concluded as assuredly that in the obscurer places of that Testament (which are very many) the best and most natural method of searching out the sense is, to inquire how and in what sense those phrases and manners of speech were understood, according to the vulgar and common dialect and opinion of that nation ; and how they took them, by whom they were spoken, and by whom they were heard. For it is no matter what we can beat out concerning those manners of speech on the anvil of our own conceit, but what they signified among them in their ordinary sense and speech. And since this could be found out no other way than by consulting Talmudic Authors who both speak in the vulgar dialect of the Jews, and also handle and reveal all Jewish matters ; being induced by these reasons, I applied myself chiefly to the reading of these books. I knew indeed well enough, that I must certainly wrestle with infinite difficulties, and such as were hardly to be overcome, yet I undervalued them all, and armed myself with a firm purpose, that, if it were possible, I might arrive to a fuller and more deep knowledge and understanding of the style and dialect of the New Testament."

To this nothing needs to be added. Lightfoot's book is a commentary on the four Gospels, part of Romans, and I Corinthians, the text being elucidated by abundant rabbinical citations. His work was supplemented in Germany a century later by Schöttgen, who carried it over the whole New Testament, by Wetstein, and in our own day by Delitzsch and Wünsche.

Work of this sort is of great value in the strictly exegetical direction, and its use is fully recognized, as a glance at the standard commentaries will show; but it by no means exhausts the service these writings are capable of rendering. The use that it makes of them is necessarily fragmentary and usually uncritical. More regard is had for verbal co-incidences with the New Testament writings than for points of real contact with New Testament life and thought.

2. We pass then to the second use of these Jewish books. They enable us to reproduce the historical course of events in the midst of which Christianity arose. For this we are mainly dependent on Josephus. This is the first task of the so-called history of New Testament Times, and is thus stated by Hausrath in his book on that subject: "The task is to see the circumstances described by Josephus with the eyes of the Evangelists, and from their experiences to complete them; and also to read the narratives of the Gospels in connection with the historical circumstances described by Josephus." So Schürer, in his well-known work, which is decidedly the best text-book and introduction to this whole study, devotes the first part to a history of the Jewish people from the time of the Maccabees to the destruction of Jerusalem, saying in explanation that the sacred history, however independent and peculiar in character, yet stands not without but within the connection of temporal events; that it is "conditioned by historical presuppositions," and "connected by a thousand threads with the contemporaneous and preceding history."

3. The third use of the literature before us is the archæological. These writings enable us to reproduce in detail the customs and manners of life in our Lord's day. Here we pass from the outer course of things to the inner state of things, which brings us still nearer to life and fact. This is the subject, for the most part, of Schürer's treatment in the second and larger part of his book,—“The inner conditions of Palestine and of the Jewish people in the time of Jesus Christ.” Edersheim, in his “Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah,” has put these books to good use in the attempt to present a “full and connected picture” of life in Christ's time. The nature and extent of our indebtedness in this respect to the Jewish writings, and especially to the Talmud, is described by him as follows:

"We know not only the leading personages in Church and State in Palestine at that time, their views, teachings, pursuits, and aims; the state of parties; the character of popular opinion; the proverbs, the customs, the daily life of the country—but we can, in imagination, enter their dwellings, associate with them in familiar intercourse, or follow them to the Temple, the Synagogue, the Academy, or to the market-place and the workshop. We know what clothes they wore, what dishes they ate, what wines they drank, what they produced and what they imported; nay, the cost of every article of their dress or food, the price of houses and living; in short, every detail that can give vividness to a picture of life." (Preface, p. xiv.)

Everyone will appreciate the value of the services which these ancient writings render in enabling us thus to know familiarly and realize vividly the outward features of the life of Christ and his first followers, to set the scene, as it were, in which these great events took place, and in some measure annul the distance and difference of habit and surroundings which separate us from them.

This is a great gain, but this is not all; and it is quite possible to over-estimate the importance of the "local and temporal background" of Christ's life.

4. The writings have a service to render that goes deeper. Beyond the information they impart as to the habits of speech and of life, is the familiarity they permit us to have with the forms and habits of thought in Christ's time. This is the fourth use to which the literature may be put. Not merely by giving details of the outer life does it enable us to look at these men and see them as they were, but by a subtler process it brings us to their point of view and helps us to look with them and see things as they saw them.

This is a matter of the utmost importance in the attempt to understand what the New Testament writers mean. Language is of course not a perfect copy and embodiment of thought. It is current coin for the exchange of thought, and it passes for more than its apparent value. The exchange depends upon a certain previous agreement, a certain large common stock of ideas and associations. There is a background and basis of life and fact behind words and beneath them, without which they cannot be understood. We may

easily be misled by the lexicon and the grammar in our attempt to get the thought of a foreign and ancient writer. We need first to get into his mental atmosphere, and change our presuppositions for his; then he can speak to us as he spoke to his contemporaries. Now the literature of the age gives precisely the help we need in order to do this. These are the books that the men of that day were writing and reading. They contain, and will impart to the student of them, the current ideas and forms of thought, that underlying view of the world with which the conceptions and the language of men are bound up and in view of which they must be interpreted.

But we cannot stop with the understanding of New Testament ideas; we must go on to the still more delicate and difficult task of constructing out of them a system of Christian truth. For this, discrimination and estimate are necessary and not to be avoided, though we are often at a loss how to make them, and though agreement in the matter is hard to reach. Divergent systems of theology are due less to differences of interpretation than to differences of choice and of emphasis; and this decisive choice and emphasis are often plainly determined by no other standard than the uncertain one of personal preference or fancy. The question, then, arises whether there may not be some outward, verifiable standard of historical fact by which our estimation may be tested and proved. May we not find in the *history* of conceptions data which shall help us, in the judgments that we cannot avoid making, as to their relative worth and position? May it not be an important help to learn to distinguish the old and the new, the ideas and ways of thinking that the first disciples had by way of natural inheritance, and which they took for granted, and the new thoughts, strange to them and scarcely grasped at first, which come from the teacher sent from God? Certainly the common fallacy of the evolutionists is to be avoided, who assume that the history of the growth of an idea determines at once its character and value. Yet on the other hand it cannot be admitted that an uncritical and arbitrary choice of biblical ideas, and an artificial arrangement of them in logical forms, give us necessarily a true system of Christian thought. In dogmatics, just as in interpretation, regard must be had for history and actual processes and relations.

It is not a matter to be ignored in our study of the Christian Apocalypse, for example, that this form of writing, so mysterious and difficult to us, was familiar to the Jew ; nor can we hope to understand the book without regard to others of the same age, which, however inferior in substance, make use of the same form, and contain some of the same ideas. There is, indeed, scarcely an eschatological conception in the New Testament which is not related to contemporaneous Jewish thought, and which is not found to have a history that throws light upon its character.

Again, scarcely anything now promises greater help toward the understanding and right appreciation of the theology of Paul than a knowledge, more exact than is yet secured, of the Jewish theology in which he was trained and from whose bondage he was delivered.

But if it is of value to us in our study of New Testament conceptions to know what the Jews thought and believed when Christ first came among them, and to trace the origin and growth of the ideas then current, it follows that the study of the books that we are considering is important and even indispensable ; for they are the sources from which this information can be gained. It is true that the importance of such study can easily be over-estimated, and its results misused ; but the correction should be found in a juster and more truly scientific use of the literature in question, not in its neglect.

Some suggestions will be made at another time in regard to the way in which the study should be conducted.